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Rawlings-Blake orders review, stresses public safety

Fire, police chiefs agree to stay on

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City Council President Stephanie C. Rawlings-Blake ordered Thursday a comprehensive review of all city agencies and pledged to keep key public safety leaders in place as she began taking the reins of the city's highest office in the wake of Mayor Sheila Dixon's resignation. Rawlings-Blake, who will ascend to mayor as the city struggles with a historic budget crisis, spoke of the "awesome and enormous responsibility" that comes with the mayor's office.

"I pledge to give you my heart and my time so that we can protect our city and deliver essential public services," Rawlings-Blake, ringed by City Council members, said at a news conference yesterday afternoon.

Since the mayor tendered her resignation as part of a plea deal in her criminal trial Wednesday afternoon, the council president has contacted a bevy of city, state and federal officials, including Gov. Martin O'Malley, a longtime political ally.



Choose
well.

Rep. Elijah E. Cummings said he spoke briefly with Rawlings-Blake on Wednesday and that he plans to meet with her next week. Asked whether Rawlings-Blake is ready to be mayor, he said that "people grow into" the role, noting that skeptics also questioned how Martin O'Malley and Sheila Dixon would handle the office.

"She will have the support of the political and business establishment," Cummings said. "I will triple my efforts to be sure she is successful."

Her office has submitted a list of requests to the Dixon administration, including the preservation of all e-mails and public records, a compilation of pending contracts and policy changes, reports from agency heads, and a summary of major contracts finalized in the past three months.

"My focus will be on ensuring an orderly, transparent and effective transition of power," Rawlings-Blake said.

Rawlings-Blake has declared that maintaining public safety is one of her key priorities and telephoned Fire Chief James S. Clack and Police Commissioner Frederick H. Bealefeld III - both Dixon appointees - Wednesday afternoon to ask them to remain in their positions. Both agreed.

"The fact that so early in that day she prioritized public safety sends me a signal of what I hope to be a very good start," the police commissioner said.

Rawlings-Blake said that she was startled by the news of the mayor's resignation, which takes effect Feb. 4 and was announced during a hearing at which she was expected to argue for a new trial.

"Yesterday morning when I woke up, I had no idea whatsoever that by the end of the day, we would be discussing a transition of power," she said.

The Dixon administration and Rawlings-Blake's office had not broached the subject of a transition until the mayor's plea was announced, officials said privately. Many staff members of both the mayor and the council president were caught off guard

by the plea deal, which many had expected to come later in the month.

The mayor avoided public events yesterday, meeting with administration officials and attending the funeral of a staff member's parent, according to her chief of staff, Demaune Millard.

Millard will be the point person on Dixon's staff for the transition. "We're going to work hand-in-hand with the president's office," Millard said. His duties include pulling together information about "the city's most pressing issues," including agency budgets and crime initiatives for the Rawlings-Blake team.

The staff is "generally supportive" of the transition, Millard said. "Folks are used to something, and it brings about a sense of uncertainty."

City Solicitor George Nilson said he plans to brief Rawlings-Blake on several pending cases, including a suit by the Department of Justice on how the city approves new group homes.

Rawlings-Blake said that she plans to announce a transition team next week. She has said she does not plan to make immediate or sweeping staff changes.

Her first weeks in office will be marked by momentous challenges. She must seek funding for the city during the General Assembly session and prepare a budget to present to the council in March. The city is struggling under a \$120 million budget deficit, which could grow to \$190 million if a pension issue is not resolved.

Already, Rawlings-Blake is taking on some of the perks and responsibilities of her future office.

She now receives crime alerts reserved for police command staff and the mayor, Bealefeld said, adding that she has been given some enhanced security measures, but would not elaborate. Traditionally, only the mayor and the city's state's attorney have security details.

Rawlings-Blake has grilled Bealefeld at numerous council hearings and has publicly bumped heads with him over several issues. But Bealefeld said they agree on key issues, including a focus on safety at nightclubs.

The council president has visited several fire stations over the past few months and been supportive of a major restoration of a historic station in Waverly, said Clack, adding that they have a "great relationship." She has publicly opposed a system of rolling closures of fire houses triggered by fire department budget cuts.

Rawlings-Blake praised both leaders, noting Clack's "honesty, commitment and determination," and saying the commissioner's crime statistics "speak for themselves."

She also commended the efforts of schools chief Andrés Alonso, who was appointed by the school board during the Dixon administration and whom she met with yesterday afternoon.

Alonso, who has met with the council president privately every month to discuss test scores, policy changes and other issues facing the school system, said that he expects Rawlings-Blake to be an "extraordinary partner" for education, as he said Dixon has been.

Joseph T. "Jody" Landers, executive vice president of the Greater Baltimore Board of Realtors, said business leaders have high hopes for a seamless transition under Rawlings-Blake, whom he described as "energetic" and "very bright." He cautioned her to preserve "continuity and momentum" as she built her team.

He said the new mayor should do her best to retain members of the administration who are "making a contribution to the life of the city and making city government work."

Baltimore Sun reporter Annie Linskey contributed to this article.

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